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ABSTRACT

Two questions serve as the focus in this study on factors affecting perception of femininity among pre-adolescent girls: (1) What are the meanings that girls themselves invested in gender and feminity? and (2) Through what social processes do girls negotiate meanings of gender and femininity? Researchers used a participant-observation study in which they could step into the world of those girls under consideration. Observations centered on sixth-grade girls (ages 11 and 12) in a public middle school in a middle-class community. All observations took place in school, primarily during lunch time, health class, gym class, and those times when girls were likely to discuss food, eating, weight, and dieting. Several themes arose from these conversations: (1) the significance and meaning of restrictive eating; (2) ways in which eating practices served to reinforce gender difference and gender segregation; and (3) the high effort girls invest in the heterosexual world. Some generalizations taken from these themes included the belief that girls fashion shared meaning of femininity through mundane conversations about everyday matters, that girls regulated one another's socialization, and that social relations and collective practices were important in shaping the meanings of gender and the conceptions of masculinity and femininity that children hold. (RJM)

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Talking Food, Doing Gender

The Social Construction of Femininity among Sixth-Grade Girls

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Paper presented as part of the symposium The Voyage Continues: Methodological Explorations in Feminist Psychology (Rachel T. Hare-Mustin, Chair) at the meeing of the American Psychological Association, New York City, August 1995.

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Talking Food, Doing Gender

The Social Construction of Femininity among Sixth-Grade Girls

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The title of our paper tells you about both the thesis guiding our study and its focus. We use the phrase "doing gender" to refer to the ongoing actions and routines by which people produce gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The term social construction repeats this idea of the ongoing production of gender and emphasizes the social or collective nature of the process. For the most part, North American psychologists interested in gender have given most attention to the effects of gender-related norms and stereotypes and of cultural representations of masculinity and femininity. But there are other collective practices involved in producing gender as well: institutional arrangements, forms of group interactions, linguistic constructs and categories, and local day-to-day negotiations of what being a man or a woman entails and demands.

In this paper, we focus on pre-adolescent girls and ask two questions: First, what are the meanings that girls themselves invested in gender and femininity? We were particularly interested in meanings associated with food, eating, and body weight. Second, through what social processes do girls negotiate meanings of gender and femininity? How do girls embroider upon, underscore, or reshape the prevailing cultural messages? We report a participant-observation study; Lauren Arcuri was the observer. In this approach, researchers step into the ordinary world of those they are studying. This immersion enables them to see people's conversations

and actions unfolding against a backdrop of ongoing events, local culture, and historical circumstances. Participant observation privileges the subjective experience of both the observer and the study participants. Lauren's own reactions to what was taking place figured as part of the data to be interpreted. Drawing on girls' everyday conversations and actions, we sought to understand both their shared meanings and the processes by which those meanings were generated and sustained. As in field work more generally, the focus of attention was not on individual actions and motives, but on collective practices, both institutional and interpersonal.

Setting and participants

The site was a public middle school in a middle-class community on Long Island, New York. The school had nearly 600 students; about a third of them were sixth graders. Although the student body was mostly white, there were a number of students whose families had recently immigrated from Mediterranean countries, South Asia, Central America, and South America.

The observations centered on sixth-grade girls (that is, 11- and 12-year-olds). All the observations took place in school, primarily during lunch time, health class, gym class, and an unstructured class period at the end of the school day. (Health classes were observed on days when nutrition was the topic.) These times were selected for one or both of the following reasons: 1) they were spaces where food, eating, weight, and dieting were likely to be topics of conversation; and 2) they were times in the school day when students interacted with one another with relatively little input from adults. Lauren recorded conversations among groups of girls, as well as girls'

interactions with boys, teachers, aides and cafeteria workers. In the short time we have today, we cannot detail all the material that the observations yielded. Instead, we summarize some key themes that emerged in our analysis.

Key Themes

The first theme concerns the significance and meaning of restrictive eating for the girls in the study. In the public setting of the school cafeteria, girls ate very little food. Moreover, they frequently drew attention to how little they were eating by both their words and their actions. For example, they offered food they "could not eat" to other girls at the lunch table. Or a girl might, take a small bite of an item of food and then throw the remainder away.

We had expected to find that girls would restrict their eating, but their stated explanations for doing so surprised us. The literature suggests that girls restrict their eating because they are dieting and further that dieting is motivated by dissatisfaction with weight and body size. The girls in this study, however, did not identify themselves as dieters. Nor did they talk about being fat, wanting to lose weight, or finding their own or other girls' body size unacceptable. In their conversations, girls offered two other accounts of why they ate so little. First, they spoke repeatedly of being disgusted or "grossed out" by a wide variety of food items. A smashed sandwich, food with a fleck of pepper on it , or a greasy French fry, for instance, was emphatically pronounced "too gross" to eat. Second, girls claimed that they were unable to eat a normal portion of food. Indeed, if a girl ate her entire lunch, she would offer an explanation/excuse for doing so, such as "I'm eating so much

because I didn't eat breakfast this morning." Not eating or eating very little did not require justification.

Eating only small amounts of food was not just a matter of individual choice or preference. At the lunch table, group pressures served to regulate the amount of food that girls ate. For instance, one girl told another girl who was eating a full portion of food, "You're really pigging out today." Moreover, it was not only how much girls ate, but also how they ate that was regulated by peer pressure. Girls who ate hungrily -- putting too much food in their mouths or eating too hurriedly -- might be reprimanded by their companions. Sometimes these reprimands drew a connection between how much or hoe a girl ate and her attractiveness to boys. For instance, one girl reprimanded another for stuffing food into her mouth by saying "What if Mark [the latter's boyfriend] saw you like that?" In another instance, two girls who were writing a hypothetical magazine article noted that a girl who is on a date "never orders what she would order with family or friends" because "she doesn't want to make a pig of herself in front of the boy."

A second theme that emerged in the observations concerned ways in which eating practices served to reinforce gender difference and gender segregation. Nearly all sixth-graders chose to sit at lunch tables that were segregated by gender. Girls routinely offered to share food with other girls, especially desirable items such as potato chips and candy, but they never offered food to boys. When boys asked for food, girls refused, even when they intended to throw the food away. Thus, giving and withholding food served as a medium

for reinforcing solidarity among girls and for asserting distance or separateness from boys.

Eating practices also served to reaffirm that boys and girls were not just different from one another but opposites. On the one hand, girls drew attention to their small appetites, to the small quantities of food they consumed, and to the limited number of food items they regarded as edible. Boys, on the other hand, engaged in public displays of voracious and indiscriminate hunger. For instance, some boys pestered other students for food or money to buy food. Moreover, boys, like girls, talked about the caloric, cholesterol, and fat content of various foods; however, for boys, such talk served as a means of announcing their voracious appetites. For example, one boy passed around a bag of O'Boises, saying "High in cholesterol....I'll eat the whole bag if no one else wants any more."

Girls' refusal to give food to boys raised a question for us. Indulging men with tasty food is a culturally-approved way for women to entice men, to signal their love, and give them pleasure (viz.: "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach." "Nothing says lovin' like something from the oven.") Moreover, nurturing or taking care of the needs of others is arguably the hallmark of conventional femininity. Yet, at least as far as nurturing in its literal sense goes, we saw little evidence of it in the girls' behavior toward boys. We wonder how and when -- if at all -- they would come under the sway of the cultural norm.

The third theme concerns heterosexual relations and girls' behavior. The girls in this study were invested in the heterosexual world, far more so than the boys who were their age peers. A good

deal of girls' conversation with one another focused on boys. Girls discussed "who likes whom" at the lunch table and in notes passed back and forth during classes. Some girls displayed the names of the boys they liked on their notebooks. Although girls' interests in boys is often regarded as a "natural" developmental outcome of hormonal maturation, the field observations suggest otherwise. Even upon casual inspection, a broad range of degrees of physical maturation was apparent among the girls. The girls who were most sexualized in terms of clothing, make-up, demeanor, and expressed preoccupation with boys and dates were not necessarily those who were physically developed. Moreover, girls' interest in boys was not simply private, individual behavior, but rather one facet of a complex and multi-faceted social system, a system that encompassed both homosocial and heterosocial relationships.

One facet of this system was the gender distribution of control and power. To quote Lauren's field notes, "Girls, not boys, run the whole 'dating' scene." For example, one girl might inform a boy that another girl "likes him." A girl might also prod a boy to ask another girl out: "Jo likes you. Do you like her? Why don't you ask her to go out?" Girls acted as go-betweens, arranging dates and meetings, writing facilitating notes on behalf of other girls. Girls also put considerable energy into coaching boys. Not only did they tell boys which girls to approach and instruct them how to do so, they sometimes coaxed boys not yet involved in the "dating scene" into getting involved. At least for the duration of the study, there were no occasions on which boys engaged in similar endeavors, whether toward others boys or toward girls.

In sum, it was girls who took the initiative in heterosocial and heterosexual relations and who managed, controlled, and worried about the romantic world. But girls' management efforts embodied a number of gender paradoxes. In prodding boys to take the initiative, girls allowed their own considerable industry and ingenuity to become part of the "backstage" of the production of heterosexual relations. Their agency was concealed, perhaps even to themselves. Moreover, girls' activities served to place boys at the center of social relations, a position that fostered a budding sense of male privilege and entitlement. Also, girls took action only on behalf of other girls; no girl took initiative on her own behalf. Rather, her girl friends pushed the romantic action forward, positioning her in the traditional "passive" role and bestowing on boys the semblance of taking the romantic lead. In a way somewhat analogous to girls' public denial of a desire for food, girls did not express directly or act upon their own desires regarding romantic relationships.

Conclusion

Participant observation studies, because they are situated within a single setting, time, and local culture, do not strive for the kinds of generalizations that psychologists usually make. We studied only one school and one cohort of sixth graders. We do not claim that the conversations and actions that we observed occur in all middle schools, nor would we claim that all sixth-grade girls share the same meanings of gender and femininity. The generalizations that we offer are of a different order:

1) Girls fashion shared meanings of femininity through mundane conversations about everyday matters, such as those that took place

in the lunchroom. For the girls we observed, these meanings included eating very little (at least in peer settings and especially in the presence of boys); putting on the appearance of a small appetite; and being easily "grossed out" or disgusted. (In addition to being "grossed out" by many aspects of food and eating, girls were also "grossed out" by "dirty" sex talk, bathroom humor, and other practices that boys engaged in.) Another set of meanings of femininity includes an interest in boys and the "dating scene." Local norms seemed to proscribe self-interested action; instead, girls managed heterosocial relations without appearing overtly in control.

2) "Socialization" is not exclusively top-down, from grown-ups to children; it also takes place among peers. Girls in our study, for example, regulated one another's eating behavior. They also cajoled boys into becoming involved in the heterosocial world and offered specific instructions about how to do so. Moreover, girls did not merely accept without question the values and norms imposed by adults and other agents of socialization.

3) Social relations and collective practices are important in shaping the meanings of gender and the conceptions of masculinity and femininity that children hold. Daily routines, mundane talk, and even the form that "showing off" and "horsing around" take are group processes by which gender takes its meanings.

In our final minutes, we turn attention to participant observation as a research method for psychologists. One question we ask is "When is such an approach the research method of choice?" Our work suggests one answer: When the researcher seeks an understanding of the "social relations, the organization and meanings

of social situations, the collective processes through which people create and recreate meanings in their everyday lives" (Thorne, 1993, p.4).

Participant observation is especially appealing to us as feminists committed to studying women's lives and to understanding the operation of gender in the social system. The data involve the everyday experiences of the participants; the data analysis and interpretation are framed in everyday language. Thus, the research reports can be accessible to a wide audience. This alone seems important feature for a feminist researcher who hopes to make a social impact. In addition, when research reports stay close to everyday experience, ordinary identities, and participants' own language categories, the practical implications of the research may be easier to envision. Finally, participant observation studies go beyond identifying the typical case or the average response. By turning attention to a range of cases and patterns of action, such studies may enable us to see possibilities for change that would otherwise be overlooked.

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